

protect the force and defend the American people.

Vaccination is not mandatory for any servicemember who has a legitimate medical or religious reason for not being vaccinated.

Mandatory vaccinations are limited to only FDA-approved vaccines. All FDA-approved COVID-19 vaccines have been determined to be safe and effective.

According to press reports, as of October 4, Active-Duty vaccination rates are as follows: the Army, 81 percent; the Navy, 90 percent; the Air Force, 80.9 percent; and the Marine Corps, 76.5 percent.

Mandatory vaccination is not a new issue for military personnel. Mandatory vaccinations for critical illnesses are mission critical, and requiring vaccination is almost as old as the military itself. I can personally verify that point. Indeed, servicemembers are currently required to get 17 different vaccinations when they enter the military or before deploying overseas, including for measles, mumps, diphtheria, hepatitis, smallpox, and the flu.

We need a healthy and ready force. We saw what happened when Navy ships were contaminated with COVID. They weren't ready to deploy. They couldn't deploy. They were tied up. Their effectiveness and ability to defend the country were marginalized, to say the least. I think this is absolutely incongruent with the practice and mission of the military.

One other thing I would say is that one of the most fundamental ethics of the military is that every soldier, sailor, marine, airman, and guardian is prepared to sacrifice for their fellow servicemember, and the idea that one would put their own personal feelings ahead of the potential for contaminating or sickening another servicemember and affecting the unit is something that I don't think squares with the ethic of the U.S. military or the effectiveness of the force.

I agree with the Secretary of Defense; therefore, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Colorado.

Mr. BENNET. Thank you, Mr. President. I would ask the quorum call be vitiated.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senate is not in a quorum call.

Mr. BENNET. For once, the Senate is not in a quorum call. It is amazing. We are having an actual debate. I can't believe it. It has been so long since that has been true.

FREEDOM TO VOTE ACT

Mr. BENNET. Mr. President, I am here to talk about voting rights today, and I actually am delighted that you are in the Chair, my colleague from Colorado, because over many years you have had so much to do with the fact that Colorado has the second-highest turnout of any State in the country—76 percent—because of what we have done,

Republicans and Democrats and unaffiliated voters working together, to make sure that Coloradans can cast their ballots.

I am tired, as I am sure you are, of hearing our colleague from Minnesota come down here, Senator KLOBUCHAR, and say that Minnesota is No. 1 in voting, which they are. They have more than 76 percent of the people that vote, but I think we will catch them, and maybe we will catch them this year.

But the reason why we have such a high turnout is because of things that we have put in place working in a bipartisan way. And when the Presiding Officer was the Governor of Colorado, you know, that was when, really, we moved to the mail-in ballot system that we have, completely fraud free and a delight, especially for people living in rural areas, where it is hard to get to the ballot box sometimes.

And so thank you for helping create a model for the country as we debate this bill in front of us. In fact, much of what this bill does—I will get to the bill in a minute—is reflective of the work that we have done in Colorado.

Mr. President, you came here during a difficult time, I would say, for our democracy. This has been, in many ways, a near-death experience for the U.S. democracy. There are countries all over the world that are totalitarian societies who are counting on our country to fail. They tell us at the negotiating table every time we sit down with them that they think we are going to fail; that democracy isn't up to the challenges of the 21st century; that it doesn't move fast enough. This place doesn't move at all many weeks and could give a person reason to wonder whether or not we are going to make it work.

But in this year, we had a particularly savage experience on January 6, when the Capitol was invaded by our own citizens, and we were escorted off the floor of the Senate, taken to a secure facility, where I watched and the Presiding Officer watched what everybody in America saw, what everybody in the world saw, which were thousands of people streaming into this Capitol to try to stop the counting of the vote at the urging of then-President Trump.

And, fortunately, because there were enough people in this body who wanted to confirm the vote, on January 20, we actually had a peaceful transfer of power, and Joe Biden became the President of the United States.

Most countries that have a January 6 never survive to January 20, you know. And when I was a kid, it was common to see these kinds of things happen in other capitals around the world, places like Tehran. You never would have imagined it would happen here in Washington, DC.

And now it has happened here in Washington, DC. But the big difference is that because more people turned out to vote than at any time in our country's history, we had that peaceful transfer of power.

And now the question for all of us, I think, as Americans, is, What are we going to do with the gift that our fellow citizens have given us by turning out to vote in the midst of a pandemic in record number? What are we going to do with that gift they have given to us—a gift of democracy, I would say, a new lease on life.

And I think we have got a moral obligation to them and to our Nation's children and, frankly, to humanity to make sure that this democracy actually works for the American people and not for the special interests that have worked so hard to corrupt it.

And there are so many ways before January 6 that our democracy was being attacked: partisan gerrymandering all over the country to allow politicians to pick their voters rather than have voters pick their politicians. That is an incredibly undemocratic thing for us to be doing across the country; the special interests that lobby this place who are basically unregulated by any campaign finance laws; the effect of Citizens United, which was the Supreme Court's decision that opened the floodgates of billionaires funding American elections instead of people funding American elections; and now, perhaps most egregiously, because it is so strategic and it is so purposeful, the attack on the vote all over the United States of America.

I find it hard to believe. I am 54 years—56. That is the saddest story I have ever told. I am 56 years old, Mr. President. As you know, I went to college in the 1980s, you know, and now I am seeing laws passed that I read about in the 1980s that passed in the 1960s to try to deny people the right to vote all over the country, to make it harder to vote.

Just this year, 19 States have passed 33 laws undermining democracy; laws to make it harder to vote early or vote by mail, two things we treasure in the State of Colorado; laws to slash the number of drop boxes or put them in really inconvenient places so people can't vote, as I do every single election with a drop box just a few blocks from my house. It takes me 30 seconds to vote, completely fraud free. Everyone in America should have the benefit of that.

We have got a law that made it a crime in Georgia to give people water while they are waiting in line to vote.

So I know there is a tendency around this place sometimes to just think that our democracy, just because it has always been here, that it is always going to be around, to assume that we can coast on the blood and the sweat and the tears of Americans who came before us, who fought generation after generation after generation to make this country more democratic, more fair, and more free. This is not a time for coasting. This is a time for us to deal with the profound threat that is stealing the right of Americans all over this country to vote, to have their

voice heard, to be able to have a say in the direction of our democracy or whether we are going to have a democracy at all, whether we are going to accept the world where politicians, like the people in this body but at the State legislatures, can overturn the independent judgment of other parts of the election apparatus, people that held the line this year when somebody in the White House was trying to intimidate them to change their mind.

We have got people in this country, State legislators, who are passing laws that would allow them to do exactly what Donald Trump said he wanted them to do, which was overturn the election judgments of independently elected or appointed officials. That is something we cannot allow to have happen because the minute that does happen, you lose the democracy. The minute you cannot make a decision at the voting booth, at the voting box, at the poll, the minute you can no longer make a decision there that is held up no matter who wins and no matter who loses, that has the confidence of the American people, that is when you lose the democracy because the whole point of a democracy, the way we make decisions, is a peaceful transfer of power.

And in the absence of that very, very unusual aspect of our society compared to other societies around the world and the history of humanity, in the absence of that, what you confront is political violence like the violence that we saw on January 6, where people tried to take by force something that should have been decided and was decided at the ballot box.

And all of this, in my view, is why it is so important for us to pass the Freedom to Vote Act. The bill includes commonsense reforms that are broadly supported by the American people, and that is because they reflect common sense, just like the American people.

And we know these reforms work, Mr. President, because we have already passed them in Colorado, thanks in large part to your leadership. We banned partisan gerrymandering. We don't have it in our State.

So, again, politicians in Colorado don't have the right to choose who their voters are; voters get to choose who their elected leaders are.

We have automatic voter registration, as this bill has; early voting, so people have a chance to get off work and go to vote and don't have to just be there on election day.

Vote by mail, which I have to say, up until the last President's Presidency, there was no one in America that was concerned about vote by mail. We had cast millions of ballots in this country without a shred of fraud. Just ask the American Enterprise Institute. They are the ones that said you are more likely to get struck by lightning than participate in voter fraud by voting by mail. That is not a Democratic-leaning organization, as everybody on this floor knows.

Secure drop boxes in your neighborhood, where it takes 30 seconds to

vote—every time I go there, next to the Botanic Gardens in my neighborhood in Denver, and I drop my ballot off, I think about all the people all over this country in 2021 who don't have the simple ability to drop their ballot off in a ballot box, who are having to wait in line for hours for the privilege to vote just because of the State they live in.

We should have basic national standards for people. It is a civil rights issue. It is an issue that is fundamental to our democracy. And having a convenient ballot box is one of those things. Having mail-in ballots is one of those things. We have had zero fraud in our system.

And as I said earlier, in many ways, it is as important to rural Colorado as any other part of our State because the people live a long way from the ballot box.

If our State's history is any guide at all, we can do this in a bipartisan way. And it is not surprising to me that vast majorities of Americans, whether they are Republicans or Independents or Democrats, support the provisions that are in this bill by wide, wide margins.

I am going to be pleased to go back to Colorado and have the chance to tell them that we have banned dark money from our political system; that the Supreme Court's fundamental misunderstanding in *Citizens United*, where they completely misdefined the problem and failed to see the corruption of inaction that happens around here, the things that aren't done because of the dark money that is spent in our elections because—for fear that some billionaire is going to show up and throw what to them is nothing into a race that could determine the outcome of our elections.

We have got to change that, and the only way we can do that is by passing this bill. And I think that if we pass this bill, what we find is that States all over this country would see 76 percent of the people voting, just like in Colorado, instead of 50 percent of the people voting or 40 percent of the people voting. That would have a huge impact on what we are doing. We could show the world that we can actually compete with the communist government in China. We can resolve the question about whether democracy is up to this in the 21st century or not.

We could invest in the next generation of Americans. We could improve our schools, improve our roads and bridges, and invest in the future again, as so many generations of Americans have done in the past when they stood up for democracy and the next generation of Americans. That is the question that we are confronted with today as we take this vote.

Are we going to stand up for our democracy? Are we going to stand up for humanity, who is relying on us to deliver a democracy that works? And are we going to stand up for the next generation of Americans and remain a beacon to the rest of the world, committed to our highest ideals and not our worst instincts?

I think we have the chance today when we take this vote to follow generations of Americans who have, in their lives, lived out those best ideals, rather than caving into our worst instincts.

It seems to me—putting Democrats and Republicans aside—the question in front of us is: Are you for democracy or not? Are you for the freedom to vote or not? Are you for maximizing fraud-free elections, where people can actually turn out to vote no matter where they live? Or are you suppressing the vote of our fellow countrymen and women?

That is the question before us. And because it is such a clear question, I would urge every one of my colleagues, Republican or Democrat, to vote for this legislation so we can set a basic standard for what the freedom of vote should look like in the United States of America.

With that, Mr. President, I appreciate your indulgence and patience.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Ms. ERNST. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

Ms. ERNST. Mr. President, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—our Nation was founded upon this set of inalienable rights that are provided to each one of us not by government, but by our Divine Creator who made us all equal. It is the role of the government to secure these blessings.

Regardless of our differences and disagreements, these principles outlined in our founding documents have always united us and made America exceptional. They are the framework of the American dream, the promise that through self-determination, hard work, and opportunity, we can all achieve a better life for ourselves and for our families.

Yet, whether you are pursuing a career, attending school, starting a business, or shopping for a dream home, DC politicians and government bureaucrats are increasingly dictating when you may exercise your rights and how you can live your life, and then spying on you to make sure that you are following the rules. This “Washington knows best” approach is negatively impacting nearly every aspect of your life, and you may not realize it.

To demonstrate the point, let's walk through a few common scenarios and the real-life consequences you could face as a result of the Biden administration's policies. For each, ask yourself: In this situation, is the government acting to secure or subvert your rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?

You work hard and probably put some of your earnings away in a savings account to pay your monthly bills